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BEFORE THE WAR—II

NOTES ON THE GENIUS OF PLACES

BY VERNON LEE

THE WOODS AROUND SIENA

ALREADY in a note written nearly fifteen years ago on returning to Siena, I asked myself where so much of its romance could have gone; and answered, even then, "where one's youth goes."

Is it for this reason, or perhaps that old German and Swiss towns have given me the habit of a richer, more colored, warmer and more intimate kind of picturesqueness? This much is certain, that Siena now strikes me as far more grim and gaunt, far more of the mere magnified mountain village, all black shafts and black archways, than my remembrance seemed to allow. Its color has dimmed! For I remembered it as predominantly of rosy pink, and now even the Palazzo Pubblico and its tower are but the carnation of a faded threadbare Eastern carpet.

Yet the weather was cloudless during these two days and the swallows circled in pure blue round that flower-and-flower stalk tower. Where is the gayness of Siena, as of its own cobalt and rose frescoes and gold-stencilled panels? Or would those also, if I had gone to see them, have seemed tarnished to my changed eyes?

There is sadness and humiliation in such infidelity to places, all the more that the Genius Loci, alone perhaps of all friends, has never turned round with an "it is your fault." So, evidently it has been my fault.

But one thing has *not* faded (although the hills seen from the Lizza are very dim blue from heat-mist or mist of years) and that is the odd longing with which those low hills southwest of Siena have always filled me.

Indeed I remember as if it were yesterday, I can almost feel, the little stab-in-the-heart, of the ultramarine of those hills beyond the Lizza, as I first saw them some thirty-eight

years ago: that special blueness against the ivory evening sky, identified itself with, became, so to speak, the color of, longing for the unattainable, the color of parting from the too briefly enjoyed.

And now, at last, thanks to the modern miracle of motor cars, I have been among those hills.

But first let me note down the accomplishment of a lesser wish, neglected, I scarcely know why, during those previous stays at Siena. I was taken, by the American novelist who has so great a knowledge of Italian Gardens, to the Villa Gori outside Porta Ovile, whose little white rococo façade on the green hill opposite the station had attracted me, reproachfully, every time I left Siena, and left without having gone up to it.

The house itself is merely like a hundred other eighteenth century Tuscan country houses. But a tunnel of clipped ilexes leads from it to a uniquely perfect open-air theatre, whose stage and orchestra and side scenes of clipped cypress stand out a vivid golden green in the sunshine at the end of that blackness. The theatre is quite small and the speaking voice carries very easily. But from the solitary cypress projecting obelisk-wise above the stage, a full-fledged nightingale was singing to the blue sky and sunset-flushed cumulus clouds of that wide vault of sky above the low, green Sienese hills.

Besides the theatre, there was likewise cut out of evergreens, a fowling place of the usual old Tuscan type, facing the town and its walls and towers. To it led another tunnel of clipped ilex which, with that dark murderous decoymound instead of the sunny theatre, at its end, struck one as much blacker, more gnarled and wholly evil. Indeed, however cheerful such domed walks of green look from outside, this particular *Tonnelle* (I think the tiresome English name is *pleached walk*) brought home to me the dreadful-ness of trees thus tortured for shade, forbidden to turn a single green leaf to the earth, and displaying to those walking under their devastated uniting branches only black and writhing trunks and limbs, Laocoons, or as in Mantegna's Allegory, black Daphnes trying to break loose and threatening to pursue the passer-by in the twilight. And here, no doubt, the only song would be that of the blinded decoy-birds in their little cages, and the shrieks of the netted and limed victims.

Ilex-woods have always fascinated me, particularly unmixed ones, since seeing those back of Spoleto, or perhaps even earlier. There is, as with the box of Box Hill, and the yew of Kingly Vale near Chichester, a special attractiveness when trees we associate with gardens, trees which almost trim themselves unaided, are offered as a free and ample gift by some spot still untouched by man. Even with the junipers on the chalk downs, the hornbeam beech worn down by Apennine sheep and snows into a semblance of hedges, the mind hovers pleasantly between the idea of forsaken pleasantries and the wild life of woods: one thinks of sylvas, but sylvas like those of marble or old lead.

At Cetinale, some fifteen miles southwest of Siena, all such hankerings are gratified. The natural ilex-woods clipped regularly through centuries for charcoal, whose former ovens make everywhere fantastic soft black circles in the moss and fallen leaves, the ilex-woods have there had a steep path or flight of steps (not unlike the ladders of waterfall at the highest points of Roman villas) cut vertically through their thickness, right up from the villa gates and bowling green to a square barocco building, shooting lodge or hermitage, at the very top. And through the gentler slopes of the woods run wide roads past forsaken charcoal-ovens, roads up which the Cardinal, who has glorified himself in huge inscriptions on the palace below, might at his ease follow the hunt in a litter slung between long-horned white bullocks, or even in a glass-coach, what time the villa was in pristine order. In his day, some scant three centuries ago, or even much more recently, these ilex-woods round Siena, continuous here and there with the then still-unshorn virgin forests of the Maremma, must have held deer and plentiful wild boar, and an occasional wolf pack strayed down in hard winters from the Amiata Mountains or the High Apennines.

It is in such woods of evergreens, naturally taking the aspect of formal gardens, and with some real formal garden like that of Cetinale, gates and statues not too far off, that I imagine the wonderful hunt of the Duke in *Don Quixote*, when the wizard's chariots drawn by black cattle and draped with black and silver like some "Triumph of Death" passed before the Ducal Court with masquers reciting verses among the flash of torches and the baying of hounds, something between a pageant and a real bit of sorcery.

The Cardinal of Cetinale doubtless played such practical jokes as these (a trifle terrified thereat himself) upon the crazy knights there were sure to be among his hangers-on. And the disquieting remembrance of such taking the name and shape of Death in vain, dressing up actor-servants as skeletons and Souls in Hell, may have mingled with remorse for gallantries or ambition and oppression when His Eminence waxed too old and gouty, or even prone to fits, to lust any more after the World and the Flesh. Then it was, I think, that he turned that hunting box (or place of gallant rendezvous) at the top of his ilex-woods into a place of spiritual retreat, toiling thither every now and then in his litter. And, lest the memories of its former mundane pleasures should perhaps awaken sinful regrets as he watched it from the palace window below, he took the strange precaution of covering its façade with a colossal cross, niches and busts of saints, dominating the neighborhood and reminding himself that he had installed a holy hermit in the commodious rooms and kitchen where, a sprightly prince of the Church, he had been wont to play at pastoral simplicity, dressing and cooking the game he had shot, with stomachered nymphs and high-booted gentlemen building up the fire and larding the roast-meat.

And now real peasants live there, and the ilex-woods of Cetinale are left to charcoal burners, and to such leaf-eared sylvans as we suspect among its rustling foliage on stormy, moonless nights.

Returning from Cetinale I begged my American friend to halt her car at the foot of some other woods nearer Siena, those of the "Hermitage of the Ilex-Woods" ("Romitorio di Lecceto," *leccio* anilex) which I had not seen since coming upon it unexpectedly in 1890. The hermitage is much larger than I expected, in fact a complete monastery, battlemented and towered for defense, among the exquisitely sweet woods of mixed ilex and oaks in young leaf, and scented, at the close of a hot day, with broom and honeysuckle. There is, which I did not remember, a whole cloister-and-porchfull of those toy-box and picture-book frescoes which endear the Sienese School; very faded, but letting you guess that the fortified towns were painted pure rose-color, the seas a delicate pea-green and the people all represented in their teens and dressed, even patriarchs, in the most ravishing finery. An inscription tells us that here St. Catherine received for

the first time her Divine Bridegroom! Perhaps at that moment the nightingales were vociferous in the ilex-woods, even as we heard them at sunset.

All this was doubtless latent in my thoughts, this wish, now satisfied, for the southwest ilex-woods, during those two days last week at Siena. What was uppermost was the sense, which I have had already years before, especially when looking down into the country from the unfinished cathedral-top, of the perfect appropriateness of a line of Swinburne's: *Siena the bride of Solitudes*.

Had we approached, as we went away, and as in fact I did twenty-five years ago with my pony, not by the Poggibonsi but by the Radda road from Florence, we should have come suddenly on her slender towers and steep-paved lanes, on the great fountain of Porta Ovale, suddenly after some twenty miles of almost uninterrupted woodland travel through the Chianti region. Even the southwesterly side, leading to Cetinale, though cultivated with corn and vineyard, has but few farmhouses and fewer villages, and those mostly on the heights: a pure, empty country beneath the wide dome of this hill-girt rolling table-land; great oaks along its dry torrent beds, and bounded by those ilex-woods and by the thought of the fever-solitudes of the Maremma. While the southernmost roads traverse that wilderness of white clay hillocks, always in view of the great volcano cones of the Amiata range.

For the Sienese territory has been the outpost of mediæval civilization, of the industrious free towns and the well-to-do Tuscany of the later Medicean Grand Dukes and the sons of Maria-Theresa, with what I call in my thoughts the South ("Italy," say many of its inhabitants, "ends at Terni," *i. e.*, forty or fifty miles *north* of Rome); *the South*, that volcanic, half barbarous, majestic and mysterious country of which Sicily is but the lopped off end, and which belongs, in a sense, to the ghosts of Antiquity.

May 22-25, 1914.

AT THE CHALET

WE walked, after wading knee deep in flowers, on the short Alpine grass, lawns girt with thin fir-woods or dotted with solitary old larches; walked along one of those natural terraces which represent, no doubt, one of the successive beds of the Rhone now flowing fathoms below. We had to

jump across adorable little soft brown bogs, full of Parnassus grass and minute reeds, as if the Snow-God had just that moment squeezed them into being with his tread. And in front, over the suddenly ending (or seemingly ending) ledge, rose and fell the intersecting lines of a valley full of silver mist, and there sat or reclined the dim silvery wraiths of the Dent du Midi and the mountains of Savoy; while, up one steep gorge, a storm blotted out everything. Cows, looking as if carved of polished walnut, were strolling with clank of bronze bells and brass-studded collars; and snow white goats chased one another and the cowherd dogs among the tree stumps and the grass-and-flower embedded stones.

Peace and Heaven's blessing!

July 1, 1914.

THE DILIGENCE ON THE SIMPLON

LYING on the grassy slope above the Chalet, my view is fenced in by the yellow and lilac petals of flowers, the Alpine grasses and herbs which outline themselves, unconscious of the great valley between, against the blue and green mountains opposite, their snow-patches and avalanche-scars. And the wind off the glaciers barely stirs this gay, tidy minuteness like a zephyr in Elysium.

All changes when I get onto my feet. For now the valley faces me, narrowing like a theatre perspective, and in it a white thread, with the mountain-lines rushing down to meet its furthest bends, and peaks turning on their side to close it in, the road to the Pass and to Italy disappears at last between the snowy obelisks of the Simplon range.

In the early morning the valley is filled with the luminous mists of the sun peering over the jagged rims and silver-white glaciers, a dust of broken light. In the midday the valley is blotted by sunshine. But always it keeps those intersecting lines drawing one like a funnel, along the shingle bed of the Rhone and the poplars of the flat road on its banks: drawing the eye; and drawing the memory to my childhood, when it also drew me with the power of Italy and Rome beyond. That road passed over the Alps, leading to the remote, the almost inaccessible south as it seemed to my childish longing; itself remote and almost inaccessible.

The railway in those days came to an end at Sierre, and Sierre itself, which the map showed tantalizingly near our Bernese summer home (why the back of this Niesen, of the

Jungfrau range in front of our windows, must certainly look down on the Rhone Valley!)—Sierre itself could be reached only by a cross-country journey which seemed interminable to one's childish measurement of time. And from Sierre the diligence of the Postes Fédérales, with the long, long day of the pass before it, started at dead of night, its six great horses looming in the steam of their own breath, catching the flicker of the guard's lantern, which outlined the ladder whence boxes and packages were hurled onto the roof of the coach and were gathered into a vast tarpaulin mound. I cannot tell exactly how often I thus started at midnight from the Postes Fédérales of Sierre; where are they, their canary colored coaches and smoking horses and tasseled and badged driver and guard? It certainly feels nowadays as if that perspective-funnel of converging mountain-slopes had sucked most of my childhood and adolescence into itself. Whatever the actual number of these Simplon crossings, I remember that on one of these occasions (perhaps it may have been the last) it was my happy lot to travel in the high hooded seat at the rear of that stacked up tarpaulined luggage. It seems improbable I should have perched there all alone; yet alone I felt and treasured that aloneness there aloft, whether it was real or imaginary; since children, who are so little alone in the body, contrive and cherish all manner of spiritual solitudes and hermitages. That rearmost uppermost seat, of which I cannot recover the beloved technical name—or was it the *Imperiale*?—corresponded I fancy to the legendary "Rumble" on which the maids and couriers of Milords rode *Vetturino* into Italy. That seat must have been bespoke at my urgent childish request, for I had prepared to savor its full adventure and romance by providing myself with a pocket reading-lamp, a little black thing which I lighted in the yard of the Postes Fédérales of Sierre, and with infinite precautions carried up the clambering steps of that dicky; the deliciousness of its heated tin and smoky oil perfumes, like the ineffable smell of stale gas in theatre-corridors, the most romantic recesses of my early memory. And then, as that road along the Rhone engulfed itself endlessly, white straightness, stoneheaps, trunks and shadows of poplars, flashing into the coach's light only to disappear, yard by yard into the darkness and void beneath the diligence and behind it, I clasped the heated lantern in agonized but happy fingers; and in its fumes of guttering candle and

scorched metal-varnish, I read out of my pocket Goethe (also brought with deep pre-vision of this midnight journey) the ballad of the Treasure-Digger . . . until, no doubt, the light went out, and I fell asleep in warm cloaks and warm (though previously despised) parental arms, awakening at icy cock-crow in front of the tulip-bulbed steeple of Brigue, for *café au lait*, before the long waking dream of walking up the hillsides with their endless parapets. I dropped behind at short cuts, catching up the laboring horses at steep corners, to drink, O bliss! ice-cold water spurting from the rock among ferns and Parnassus-daisies, and tasting rapturously of folded leathern cup. Until, half asleep once more towards nightfall, the rushing stride of the six huge horses carried one down into Italy.

VERNON LEE.